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ABSTRACT

The role of the literature review in a research project is discussed, in the context of classroom research on language teaching. The discussion is intended for teachers undertaking such research with little or no experience, and offers step-by-step guidelines for conducting and using a review of literature in second language learning. First, literature review is defined and its role at different stages in the research is discussed briefly. The initial general survey of literature is then described, with specific recommendations made for sources of information, including techniques for using computer-based networks and resources. Techniques are suggested for extracting relevant information from the sources found and for tailoring the references selected to the specific research project. Finally, principles for writing the review are identified. Contains eight references. (MSE)

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Chapter 4

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Literature Reviews: Obtaining Perspective

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"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
"I don't much care where—" said Alice.
"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.
– Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

The question central to all research is, "Which way should I go from here?" Response to this question requires background knowledge to broaden the field of inquiry and then further research to narrow the parameters and frame the research question. This paper looks at the literature review—the researcher's attempt at gathering the necessary background information to figure out where one is and, subsequently, where one is going. It is aimed at teachers with little or no research experience and endeavors to give step-by-step guidelines for conducting and using a review of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature.

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What is a Literature Review?

A literature review or literature search is essential for any research project. It usually takes place after the researcher has decided on an area of research interest, but before the research question has been formulated. Often there is a second and even third review later in the research process to expand or tighten up the scope of the project. The literature review entails the researcher locating, in journals and

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books, research articles relevant to his or her research interests. After collecting a wide and thorough sample of pertinent articles, the researcher must read, synthesize and report on the information uncovered during the survey.

Brown (1988, p. 46) wrote that a literature review should "provide the background or rationale for the study, a demonstration of how previous research is related to the study, and a framework for viewing the study." Nunan (1992, p. 216) agreed that, "the literature review, if carried out systematically, will acquaint you with previous work in the field, and should alert you to potential pitfalls in the chosen area." He added the caution that, "you may come across a study which answers the very question you are proposing to investigate." Seliger and Shohamy (1989, p. 65) referred to literature reviews as "contextualizing the research." They argued that a survey of the literature is undertaken for the seemingly contradictory purposes of broadening the perspective of the project and narrowing down the topic, "because in research there is a need to both expand the perspective and to narrow it down in order to arrive at a workable research question."

Although the terms and definitions differ slightly from researcher to researcher, there is agreement that a review of the literature is necessary for meaningful research. In fact, without a proper survey of the literature, there could be trouble formulating the research question. The intention of a review is not to boldly go where no one has gone before, but to follow the paths others have pioneered before striking out into the uncharted wilderness. Undertaken in the pre-research question stage, it helps to build a foundation for the project and ensures that the researcher does not reinvent the wheel. Performed in the middle of a project, it broadens the researcher's perspective, and suggests new avenues for inquiry. Conversely, late in the research process it helps to focus the evaluation of data, and further clarify the research question.

How to Begin

It is not my intention to grapple with probably the most difficult stage of research: research design and formulating the research question. Suffice it to say, the first thing to be determined, at least in a general sense, is the research idea. This is usually a difficult task for the novice and requires curiosity, observation, and reading on the part of the potential researcher (see Griffee, 1994). But, as Seliger and Shohamy (1989) pointed out, it becomes easier with experience because "research is cyclical. It is an ongoing activity which is never totally completed because each piece of research raises additional questions for more research."

When the research idea has been decided, the first thing to be done is a general literature survey to determine the history (or lack thereof) of the proposed topic. If similar studies have been carried out, the researcher should use the findings to determine the present state of the field and decide if there are any unanswered questions. However, if there have been no similar studies, the researcher must ascertain the reasons why and determine the feasibility of conducting such re-

search. At this point the researcher will need to define concepts, determine the type of study (e.g. heuristic or deductive), and formulate the research question.

Obtaining References

There are many ways to begin a general survey. The best is to speak with an author or researcher who has primary knowledge in the area of interest. These people gather at large language conferences, such as the JALT National Convention or the TESOL Annual Convention, and present papers in their special fields. It is usually possible to attend these presentations and with persistence meet the speaker and ask for advice. As well, these speakers often distribute bibliographies or recommend articles for further study.

Another source of material that can be found at these conventions are the publishers themselves—major publishers will all have displays manned by knowledgeable representatives. Although biased towards their own products, the representatives will suggest appropriate books, which have useful information and unbiased bibliographies. A third option is to ask other teachers in attendance at the conference for help. By asking enough people, the enthusiastic novice is sure to find someone who can point her or him in the right direction.

Technology offers the opportunity to communicate with fellow researchers through the Internet. Anyone with access to a computer with a modem can send and receive information from anywhere in the world quickly and economically. According to Busch (1994, p. 17) a good place to contact others in the SLA field is TESL-L, a computer bulletin board sponsored by the International English Institute of Hunter College, which is located in New York City. Over 1,400 ESL teachers and academics from 48 countries use the bulletin board to communicate on topics concerning second language acquisition. TESL-L can be joined by sending the message "Sub TESL-L <first name last name>" to <listserv@cunyvm.bitnet> or <listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu>.

A different way to get started is by reading a general applied linguistics book (they usually contain massive literature reviews), that gives an overview of the issues in the second language acquisition field. A couple of the best are *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, Ellis (1994) and *An Introduction to Second Language Research*, Larsen-Freemen and Long (1991). These are comprehensive studies of the SLA field, and are invaluable as an introduction and research reference. As well, both have extensive bibliographies.

Of course, the most tried and true method of obtaining suitable references is to go to a library and start digging around. Unfortunately, because teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) are often living and working in places where suitable libraries are scarce, this kind of research can be difficult or impossible. One option is to approach university libraries and ask for permission to use their facilities. Usually, international universities or local campuses of foreign (especially American) universities have the resources for second language research and will allow

use of their library for a fee. Privileges are restricted, however, and often a letter of introduction from a home library or a guarantor is required as part of the application. For more information on how to gain library access, read "Using Japanese Libraries to Do Second Language Research" (Busch, 1994), or call university libraries directly to find out about their visitor policies.

Those lucky enough to have a good library nearby should first check if the library is connected to ERIC (the Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse). ERIC is a computer database which lists documents, journals, and serial publications on different topics related to education. Researchers using ERIC enter-in a field of descriptors—defining the parameters of the search—and receive a list, including abstracts, of citations that meet those conditions. Any documents or journal articles that seem relevant can be ordered for a fee. For more details, read "Research in Japan" (Baskin, 1994), which gives an excellent overview of using ERIC and ordering documents from within Japan.

If ERIC is not an option, the best place to start is recent copies of any of the major journals in the second language field: *Applied Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, *Second Language Research*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, and *TESOL Quarterly*. These journals are all widely available, and many print an index—usually in the first or last issue of the year—of all articles received in the previous 12 months. Scanning the titles in the index should offer a number of possibilities which can be assessed by finding the article and reading the abstract.

Extracting Relevant Information

Though there are many ways to obtain references, there is only one way to extract the relevant information, and that is to read. After collecting a stack of articles or list of references, the researcher must separate the wheat from the chaff by reading the abstracts to decide if the material is germane to the research interest and worth reading. Again, the novice may find this difficult, but as one's knowledge of SLA broadens, articles can be assessed more quickly. Criteria to consider when determining the importance of material include the relationship of the material to the proposed research, the source of the material, and recency of publication. Of course, articles with a direct relationship to the proposed research will be more important than those with only a secondary or tertiary connection. Likewise, primary information from well known sources is preferable to second-hand reports or information from unknown or unpublished sources. Finally, researchers should try to review the most up-to-date literature available. It is necessary to obtain the most recent material to ensure coverage of the latest developments in the area of interest.

It is a good idea to devise a note-taking system to organize the reading of the literature. Seliger and Shohamy recommend using a computer database or index cards, and I prefer a small notebook, but the information that needs to be recorded

remains constant regardless of the medium. For each article the researcher must copy down bibliographical information, and should identify and summarize the main arguments or findings. It is important to point out the relevance of the material to the researcher's own interests and write down any ideas on how the information fits into a conceptual framework of the field. The researcher may also want to identify and mark possible quotations to be used when reporting on the review. It is helpful to organize these summaries in some order: alphabetic, by importance, or chronologically. Irrelevant materials should be discarded.

Reading the articles is time consuming and can become overwhelming, as each article offers further areas for inquiry and the research process becomes a series of unending trails. This broadening of perspective often leads into other disciplines (Sociology, Psychology, Education, Linguistics). Brumfit (1995, p. 37) encouraged that tendency: "Research needs to be interdisciplinary, because our reactions to the people with whom we work cannot be constrained by single disciplinary perspectives." The question then becomes, "How much is enough?"

Literature reviews are conducted for different purposes, each with specific requirements. If the researcher is writing for a pedagogical journal like *The Language Teacher*, a brief background check with no more than a half dozen to a dozen sources is usually sufficient. However, research oriented periodicals like the *JALT Journal*, *TESOL Quarterly*, or *Applied Linguistics* require more substantial investigation. Bibliographies in these journals are often a few pages long. The number of relevant sources should act as a guide to the inexperienced researcher. Too many sources may mean the topic is too broad and needs to be narrowed down. Conversely, too few references may indicate a need to expand the scope of the research, or the need to work harder to dig up relevant material.

Writing the Review

As stated earlier, while reading and summarizing the various articles, the researcher needs to simultaneously organize the extracted information, and try to fit it into its place in the survey. A literature review should not be a discussion of one article after another—one paragraph per study. Instead, the researcher should try to develop a framework in which a conceptual order is imposed. This conceptual framework should identify and define the important issues or variables in the field, and the researcher should organize the review to discuss each one in the context of the literature. What should emerge is a clear picture of the history and current state of the research area, what Brown (1988, p. 46) called, "a framework for viewing the study." He went on to add that "an author who is broaching an unexplored area of research cannot cite previous works [but] should at least explain the route by which this new area was reached."

Once the past and present have been discussed, it is time to consider the future. The researcher must state the rationale of his or her own research

project, and consider the significance of the research for language pedagogy. This rationale could contain an evaluation of earlier research, and should include a statement of purpose to justify the proposed research project. Often here is where the survey will end.

In graduate school or teacher training courses, the literature review forms the foundation for much of the work, and the researcher is a student who is assigned a survey to get a grounding in SLA. If the researcher is conducting the review to support his or her own research project, there should be enough information to shape the research idea and focus it into a research question. As the project continues, the researcher will probably need to periodically refer back to the survey for support. It is also necessary to add to and edit the review as the research matures, the researcher's perspective changes, and the project focus narrows.

Summary

This paper endeavored to give the novice researcher some of the guidance and information needed to conduct a survey of SLA literature. The literature review is the most fundamental type of research. It forms the basis for much of the work at graduate school, and is essential for teacher training courses. It provides the necessary background to frame research projects and leads researchers towards their research goals. Performed early in a research project, it helps build the foundation on which to base further inquiry. As the research progresses, the literature review broadens the perspective of the study and helps to shape the research interest into a focused idea. The review requires the researcher to be a sleuth and a critic. It makes teachers look at the theoretical underpinnings of their profession and subsequently leads to greater understanding and professional development.

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